Three Tales From Omelas

The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas, 1973

The Ones Who Stay and Fight, 2020

Why Don't We Just Kill the Kid In the Omelas Hole, 2024

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Ursula K. Le Guin's 1973 tale of the nearly-utopian city of Omelas has inspired anarchists and our fellow travelers for half a century. Less well known are the two contemporary expansions of the Omelas lore by N.K. Jemisin and Isabel J. Kim. After reading all three many times, I believe that the whole tale of Omelas (and Um-Helat) is best taken as a triptych. That triptych is collected here. May you be inspired and troubled by it in equal measure.

injection. So it's clear that sometimes the kid is alive and suffering, and sometimes the kid has been killed and doesn't exist.

Or maybe there's no kid anymore, and Omelas is just like everywhere else: lucky until it isn't.

Occasionally a content creator will walk into Omelas and film a video while standing on one of the balconies of the Nice Houses or while sitting on one of Omelas' beautiful beaches. They will talk about the history of Omelas in the same way that people talk about the Uyghurs situation in China, the concentration camps of the Third Reich, the comfort women imported from Korea by Japan, the Belgian Congo, the Atlantic Slave Trade in relation to the American South, and the refugees who sink in ships off the coast of Western Europe.

And they (the ones who visit Omelas) say: Thank God we aren't dealing with that horrid wound in society. Thank God there is somewhere that shows us how fucking bad things could get. What a pit in the ground. What a fucked up little trolley problem. What a lesson for us. Thank God we don't live there. Thank God we know it exists.

Like: “The kid is a SYMBOL of the LOWER CLASSES and how they SUFFER.”

Like: “No, seriously, where does the kid come from? My mom says she saw a kid disappear off the train, that they’re kidnapping kids off of public transit.”

Like: “If we put a pulsating mass of tissue cultured from the cells of an Omelan child, and put that in the prison, would that have the same effect, in the same way that lab-grown-meat is still technically meat?”

By now everyone (except the newscasters) had stopped counting dead children, and nobody has any questions for the murderers anymore. The dead murderer was wrong. They haven’t run out of children. But they haven’t run out of murderers, either.

These days, Omelas is perfect except when it isn’t, and every once in a while, Omelas has a series of natural disasters and freak accidents strike and everyone is a little afraid that their kid will be the next one in the hole. But only when the kid is dead and a new kid needs to be chosen.

A drop of blood, in a bowl of milk.

Omelas now has a really long Wikipedia entry, with a whole subarticle about the load-bearing suffering child, and a second subarticle about the children who died. They tell you about the children now, after they die. What their names are. They promise that the children are ethically sourced. But there aren’t any citations. And some people say that there isn’t a kid in the hole anymore. They’ve moved the hole a bunch of times, and they don’t let people know the location anymore. They have extra soundproofing.

Most days, Omelas is sunny and beautiful and nothing bad happens. And then there will be a day that is overcast and cloudy, and on that day, people die in circus accidents and carbon monoxide leaks and start harassment campaigns on twitter. And sometimes on that day people die through lethal

The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas

Ursula K. Le Guin, 1973

With a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea. The rigging of the boats in harbor sparkled with flags. In the streets between houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss-grown gardens and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings, processions moved. Some were decorous: old people in long stiff robes of mauve and gray, grave master workmen, quiet, merry women carrying their babies and chatting as they walked. In other streets the music beat faster, a shimmering of gong and tambourine, and the people went dancing, the procession was a dance. Children dodged in and out, their high calls rising like the swallows' crossing flights over the music and the singing. All the processions wound towards the north side of the city, where on the great water-meadow called the Green Fields boys and girls, naked in the bright air, with mud-stained feet and ankles and long, lithe arms, exercised their restive horses before the race. The horses wore no gear at all but a halter without bit. Their manes were braided with streamers of silver, gold, and green. They flared their nostrils and pranced and boasted to one another; they were vastly excited, the horse being the only animal who has adopted our ceremonies as his own. Far off to the north and west the mountains stood up half encircling Omelas on her bay. The air of morning was so clear that the snow still crowning the Eighteen Peaks burned with white-gold fire across the miles of sunlit air, under the dark blue of the sky. There was just enough wind to make the banners that marked the racecourse snap and flutter now and then. In the silence of the broad green meadows one could hear the music winding throughout the city streets, farther and nearer and ever approaching, a cheerful faint sweetness of the air that from time to time trembled and gathered together and broke out into the great joyous clanging of the bells.

Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How describe the citizens of Omelas?

They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy. But we do not say the words of cheer much any more. All smiles have become archaic. Given a description such as this one tends to make certain assumptions. Given a description such as this one tends to look next for the King, mounted on a splendid stallion and surrounded by his noble knights, or perhaps in a golden litter borne by a great-muscled slave. But there was no king. They did not use swords, or keep slaves. They were not barbarians. I do not know the rules and laws of their society, but I suspect that they were singularly few. As they did without monarchy and slavery, so they also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb. Yet I repeat that these were not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians. They were not less complex than us. The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain. If you can't lick 'em, join 'em. If it hurts, repeat it. But to praise despair is to condemn delight, to embrace violence is to lose hold of everything else. We have almost lost hold; we can no longer describe a happy man, nor make any celebration of joy. How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? They were not naive and happy children—though their children were, in fact, happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched. O miracle! But I wish I could describe it better. I wish I could convince you. Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all. For instance, how about technology? I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets; this follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are happy people. Happiness is based

any way that matters. The kid will die again and again until you stop putting kids in the hole."

And he grinned a big white grin (they had really good dental care in Omelas that wasn't tied to a separate insurance) and was executed by painless lethal injection and so became the first person in Omelas (other than all the load-bearing suffering children) who Omelas, as a state, had killed, and Omelas became the sort of city that killed people using painless lethal injection.

But that was okay, because it happened during the period of time while the kid wasn't in the hole, so it was a fluke, the same way the typhoon was a fluke, the homophobia was a fluke, the Omelans being shitheads on social media was a fluke. It was something that could only happen while Omelas wasn't Omelas and was instead just like every other city with no load-bearing suffering child and many load-bearing suffering adults.

The day after the lethal injection, the fifth kid was killed in the hole. And then the executioner walked out of Omelas, but no one paid attention to her leaving.

It turned out that the dead murderer had underestimated the Omelans, because things continued in this cyclical fashion for a while. Kids were put in a series of holes and were summarily killed. The deaths were reported on public television and were dissected badly on social media through a variety of angles.

Like: "This kid is a metaphor for the third world and for the slave labor that mines the rare metals that go into iPhones and for the boys who cross the border to work in the fields while they're underage and the girls who are sold into marriage to pedophiles."

Like: "This kid is a reincarnation of a Bodhisattva and is perfectly happy to experience suffering for the sake of her fellow man, so really it's like, totally fine that the kid is suffering."

Like: "Why do we care about this kid so much, it's just one kid?"

forever, and everyone is so fucking afraid of doing something that we pretend that we are living better lives without suffering. It's disgusting."

He spoke with the moral certainty of the classical Omelan who knew about suffering only abstractly and through the existence of the load-bearing suffering child.

"What are you trying to solve?" the executioner said. The executioner was the only one in the room, but she was relaying the questions from the Nice House Experiencers who had sourced the questions from a public questionnaire and had approved of every single one, because at the end of the day, admittedly, every person in Omelas lived in a Nice House.

"If we kill enough kids then you will eventually stop putting kids in the hole," the murderer said. "I'm an accelerationist."

"A lot of people died because you killed the kid."

"I'm sorry about that," the murderer said, and he sounded genuine. He sounded like he really cared about the well-being of all the Omelans and their susceptibility to freak accidents, but he cared about the one kid just a little more.

"How did it feel to kill?" the executioner said. This was not a question that was on the list. This was a question the executioner wanted to know for herself.

"Bad," he said. "But it's better than being locked in the hole for your entire life."

The executioner didn't say anything to that. She turned away from him to prepare the syringe and the chemicals.

"Before I'm dead, I'd like to say a few words," the murderer said to the executioner's back. "We will keep killing the kid in the hole. You are going to run out of kids before we stop killing the kids that go into the hole. Even if you kill me, now we all know about killing the load-bearing suffering child. You can't kill me in

on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive. In the middle category, however—that of the unnecessary but undestructive, that of comfort, luxury, exuberance, etc.—they could perfectly well have central heating, subway trains, washing machines, and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here, floating light-sources, fuelless power, a cure for the common cold. Or they could have none of that: it doesn't matter. As you like it. I incline to think that people from towns up and down the coast have been coming to to Omelas during the last days before the Festival on very fast little trains and double-decked trams, and that the trains station of Omelas is actually the handsomest building in town, though plainer than the magnificent Farmers' Market. But even granted trains, I fear that Omelas so far strikes some of you as goody-goody. Smiles, bells, parades, horses, bleh. If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate. Let us not, however, have temples from which issue beautiful nude priests and priestesses already half in ecstasy and ready to copulate with any man or woman, lover or stranger, who desires union with the deep godhead of the blood, although that was my first idea. But really it would be better not to have any temples in Omelas—at least, not manned temples. Religion yes, clergy no. Surely the beautiful nudes can just wander about, offering themselves like divine souffles to the hunger of the needy and the rapture of the flesh. Let them join the processions. Let tambourines be struck above the copulations, and the glory of desire be proclaimed upon the gongs, and (a not unimportant point) let the offspring of these delightful rituals be beloved and looked after by all. One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt. But what else should there be? I thought at first there were no drugs, but that is puritanical. For those who like it, the faint insistent sweetness of drooz may perfume the ways of the city, drooz which first brings a great lightness and brilliance to the mind and limbs, and then after some hours a dreamy languor, and wonderful visions at last of the very arcane and inmost secrets of the Universe, as well as exciting the pleasure of

sex beyond all belief; and it is not habit-forming. For more modest tastes I think there ought to be beer. What else, what else belongs in the joyous city? The sense of victory, surely, the celebration of courage. But as we did without clergy, let us do without soldiers. The joy built upon successful slaughter is not the right kind of joy; it will not do; it is fearful and it is trivial. A boundless and generous contentment, a magnanimous triumph felt not against some outer enemy but in communion with the finest and fairest in the souls of all men everywhere and the splendor of the world's summer: This is what swells the hearts of the people of Omelas, and the victory they celebrate is that of life. I don't think many of them need to take drooz.

Most of the processions have reached the Green Fields by now. A marvelous smell of cooking goes forth from the red and blue tents of the provisioners. The faces of small children are amiably sticky; in the benign gray beard of a man a couple of crumbs of rich pastry are entangled. The youths and girls have mounted their horses and are beginning to group around the starting line of the course. An old woman, small, fat, and laughing, is passing out flowers from a basket, and tall young men wear her flowers in their shining hair. A child of nine or ten sits at the edge of the crowd alone, playing on a wooden flute. People pause to listen, and they smile, but they do not speak to him, for he never ceases playing and never sees them, his dark eyes wholly rapt in the sweet, thin magic of the tune.

He finishes, and slowly lowers his hands holding the wooden flute.

As if that little private silence were the signal, all at once a trumpet sounds from the pavilion near the starting line: imperious, melancholy, piercing. The horses rear on their slender legs, and some of them neigh in answer. Sober-faced, the young riders stroke the horses' necks and soothe them, whispering, "Quiet, quiet, there my beauty, my hope..." They begin to form in rank along the starting line. The crowds along the racecourse are

“What they,” she said instead. “How do I know you’re not the one who killed the kid?”

This question was replicated in many rooms, during many meetings that escalated to shouting until at one point someone said: “Why are we arguing so much when the kid is in the hole? The kid is in the hole, which means that we shouldn’t have so much infighting. What is the point of the kid in the hole if we can’t even get our act together!”

That had many philosophical implications on whether disagreements can exist in paradise, but in reality, all of this bullshit only meant that the people with the Nice Houses were distracted enough that the fourth kid was killed easily, and without much fanfare.

And then there was an avalanche, a spread of religiously motivated homophobia, and an incidence of road rage with a tranquilizer gun that left four dead.

But they managed to catch the specific guy who had killed the fourth kid. They caught him on the newly installed CCTV cameras that did ’round the clock surveillance. They arrested him at his home, which was near the sinkhole.

The murderer surrendered peacefully. He was a very regular looking man. Nothing about him looked like a murderer or a dissident. He looked just like every other person who had benefited from Omelas’ many social safety networks and had grown up without ever knowing suffering.

Before his execution, they (the people with the Nice Houses, as a proxy for the newscasters, as a proxy for everyone else) asked him why he was doing this. The murderer didn’t shrug, because he was being held by a Kevlar straitjacket, which had been imported from outside.

“I’m personally doing it because I think we’re all cowards here. We’re all so fucking afraid of the potential of being the one to suffer that we put that damn kid in the hole and the kid suffers

has really good social services and there is ready access to birth control and easy ways for people with wombs to give up the infants they gestated to people that want them, and therefore all children are wanted and cared for by someone in Omelas, regardless of whether it is their biological progenitor, where do the Omelans get the load-bearing suffering child?"

And the follow-up freak-out: "Oh my god, they must be stealing our children."

Of course, nothing in the freak-outs materially touched the Omelans, because Omelas was a shining city on a hill that could only be hurt when there was no load-bearing suffering child, and the dead child had been immediately replaced, so Omelas wasn't assaulted by foreign troops, and there were no trade sanctions against it, and people didn't stop going to its beaches. But they had to do some media spin, and the Nice House Experiencers went on TV to reassure the world that the load-bearing suffering child was an ethically sourced, no one's son, and definitely an Omelan, and meanwhile some of the Nice House Experiencers privately spoke among each other.

"Look, maybe we shouldn't have a kid in the hole?" one of the Nice House Experiencers said. "Maybe the kid in the hole was always a bad idea."

"What's the other option?" the second Nice House Experience said. "Look me in the eye and tell me there is a better solution than putting one single kid in the hole, and letting that one single kid have a miserable life, in return for the good lives of all of our children?"

"What if they put your kid in?"

And the second Nice House Experiencer didn't have an answer for that. Because she knew in her heart of hearts that she would damn every last person in Omelas rather than subject her child to the hole.

like a field of grass and flowers in the wind. The Festival of Summer has begun.

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads, stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room, a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits hunched in the corner farthest from the bucket and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there; and the door is locked; and nobody will come. The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes—the child has no understanding of time or interval—sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks. "I will be good, " it says. "Please let me out. I will be good!" They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, "eh-haa, eh-

haa," and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.

This is usually explained to children when they are between eight and twelve, whenever they seem capable of understanding; and most of those who come to see the child are young people, though often enough an adult comes, or comes back, to see the child. No matter how well the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed.

The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child.

and no blackouts and good schools and low crime and community-oriented government and safe sidewalks and public transit that worked.

Things got really toxic online. Then the third kid was killed.

This time it was harder to say who the killers were, because the first they, the killers, had osmosed into the second they (the “they” of the Nice Houses), and also, the third they (the “they” who were the janitors with the good PPE equipment, and the newscasters). So it was never discovered who exactly slipped through all the protections and the soundproofing and the soldiers with tranquilizer guns (because there were no real guns in Omelas) and stole the kid from the hole and killed it in the conference room where the people with the Nice Houses met to talk about government.

There was no message this time because the dead kid on the table was the message. The dead kid had been dressed just like every other kid in Omelas (comfortable, affordable clothing of good quality, with adorable patterns), and it hadn’t been in the hole for long enough to develop the really horrific features that the kids in the hole always developed (open and weeping sores on their butts, skinny limbs and a protruding stomach, a sort of lank greasiness that permeated their entire being), and this third dead kid mostly just looked a little skinny, and grimy, and asleep.

There was an earthquake that cracked the west side and opened a sinkhole, and four cars were swallowed up in a freak accident. They talked about it on the news, alongside photos of the dead kid dressed up in the conference room. And because the Omelans all had very good educations where they learned about the literary meaning of symbols, they knew that the dead kid in pretty clothing was a reminder of the fact that the child in the hole was also an Omelan child.

The rest of the world, which had variable public education and overworked language arts teachers, freaked out on social media. The sentiment boiled down to: “If Omelas is a perfect city and

Omelas' beautiful beaches and nightclubs and festivals, because the knowledge of the child was so goddamn fucking horrific and tainted everything. And maybe it was the Omelans who should be killed.

This sentiment made the Omelans kind of upset. They pointed out that Omelas was a better place to live than most other places because at least you knew the load-bearing suffering child suffered for a reason, as opposed to all the other kids who were suffering for no reason. Out there, kids had their arms ripped off while they were working in chicken processing plants, kids were left in baby boxes, and kids lived in perfect quiet misery with one parent who was an alcoholic and another parent who beat them. In Omelas, there were only good parents and no child suffered except the single one who did. How dare you say shit about our fair city and our single child, when you won't even help your own.

What the Omelans didn't say was that their second grievance was due to the fact that the kid killers had broken the unspoken code: if you had a problem with the load-bearing suffering child, you were supposed to get the hell out of Omelas and keep it to yourself. You weren't supposed to kill the kid. As a teenager, you were supposed to learn the blunt truth that your society was built on a single ongoing act of senseless, meaningless cruelty, and then you were supposed to cry about it or rage about it, but either way you were supposed to get over it and grow up and get on with your fully-paid-for-by-the-state education system and your festivals and your legal weed and your drooz.

The kid was the drop of blood in the bowl of milk whose slight bitterness would make the sweetness of the rest of Omelas richer. Without the kid in the hole, Omelas was just paradise. With the load-bearing, suffering child, Omelas meant something.

And of course, it was true that the whole city literally ran on the load-bearing suffering child in a very real physical way that was not a metaphor. And everyone really liked having running power

Often the young people go home in tears, or in a tearless rage, when they have seen the child and faced this terrible paradox. They may brood over it for weeks or years. But as time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom: a little vague pleasure of warmth and food, no real doubt, but little more. It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. Its habits are too uncouth for it to respond to humane treatment. Indeed, after so long it would probably be wretched without walls about it to protect it, and darkness for its eyes, and its own excrement to sit in. Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it. Yet it is their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and the acceptance of their helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives. Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if the wretched one were not there sniveling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could make no joyful music as the young riders line up in their beauty for the race in the sunlight of the first morning of summer.

Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible.

At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or a woman much older falls silent for a day or two, then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl, man or woman.

Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.

about the well-being of Omelas and all of the citizens except for the kid in the hole. The newscasters talked about the second dead kid sorrowfully and the social media posters (every citizen in Omelas had a healthy and regular relationship with social media and not a bad and addictive one) talked about how this was a real tragedy because even though we knew that there was a kid in the hole, now that's three times as many kids in the hole, and it's extra sad because we usually don't kill the kid in the hole, they usually die of old age or malnutrition.

None of this mattered to the living third kid in the hole, who was not enjoying the hole experience.

But nobody heard the third kid's sobbing because of the soundproofing, and also because now no one was allowed to go see the kid since security had been beefed up around the load-bearing suffering child to prevent its death and prolong its suffering. Which meant that the kid-killers had to seriously plan the next attempt, and everyone had time to decompress from the first two murders of the load-bearing suffering child, and also, the video of the second very graphic murder circulated outside of Omelas.

Everyone (me, you, the newscasters, the janitors with the good PPE, the children who lived inside and outside Omelas) was performatively disgusted by the video. Everyone watched it anyway. It went viral like a snuff film went viral or Kim Kardashian's first sex tape went viral, and it was like the load-bearing suffering child was in everyone's home at once, like there were a million load-bearing suffering children looking at you from a million screens.

Many non-Omelan people said a lot of very mean things (no one outside Omelas had a good and normal relationship with social media), like that the Omelans were monsters for letting the load-bearing suffering child exist and therefore everything about Omelas was fucked beyond belief, and had they known about the load-bearing suffering child, they never would have visited

Why Don't We Just Kill the Kid In the Omelas Hole

Isabel J. Kim, 2024

So they broke into the hole in the ground, and they killed the kid, and all the lights went out in Omelas: click, click, click. And the pipes burst and there was a sewage leak and the newscasters said there was a typhoon on the way, so they (a different "they," these were the "they" in charge, the "they" who lived in the nice houses in Omelas [okay, every house in Omelas was a nice house, but these were Nice Houses]) got another kid and put it in the hole.

And the newscasters said the hurricane had dissipated into a tropical storm, and the pipes were repaired, and the well-paid janitors cleaned up the sewage leak while wearing proper PPE, and the kid in the hole cried and cried and cried. Or they (the general "they," the "they" that meant you and me and the janitors and the newscasters) assumed that the kid was crying, because the hole was soundproofed so nobody could hear the kid, which didn't stop them from knowing about the kid, but it sort of helped.

So they (the first "they") killed the kid again. They stormed the hole and broke the kid out and slit the kid's throat on public television (as all television in Omelas was publicly funded), and they said, "Look at what sort of shit your beautiful city is built on!" and the kid bled out and it was extremely graphic to the point of being censored in later broadcasts. And one of the tracks of the free public transit system twisted loose, and a bunch of commuters were killed in a freak accident, and the stock market started shuddering downward, and a house collapsed on the south side of Omelas.

So they (the "Nice Houses" they) got a third kid and stuck it in the hole. They felt weird about it, but they liked their Nice Houses, and also, they really did truly and wholeheartedly care

The Ones Who Stay and Fight

N.K. Jemisin, 2020

It's the Day of Good Birds in the city of Um-Helat! The Day is a local custom, silly and random as so many local customs can be, and yet beautiful by the same token. It has little to do with birds —a fact about which locals cheerfully laugh, because that, too, is how local customs work. It is a day of fluttering and flight regardless, where pennants of brightly dyed silk plume forth from every window, and delicate drones of copperwire and featherglass—made for this day, and flown on no other!—waft and buzz on the wind. Even the monorail cars trail stylized flamingo feathers from their rooftops, although these are made of featherglass, too, since real flamingos do not fly at the speed of sound.

Um-Helat sits at the confluence of three rivers and an ocean. This places it within the migratory path of several species of butterfly and hummingbird as they travel north to south and back again. At the Day's dawning, the children of the city come forth, most wearing wings made for them by parents and kind old aunties. (Not all aunties are actually aunties, but in Um-Helat, anyone can earn auntie-hood. This is a city where numberless aspirations can be fulfilled.) Some wings are organza stitched onto school backpacks; some are quilted cotton stuffed with dried flowers and clipped to jacket shoulders. Some few have been carefully glued together from dozens of butterflies' discarded wings—but only those butterflies that died naturally, of course. Thus adorned, children who can run through the streets do so, leaping off curbs and making whooshing sounds as they pretend to fly. Those who cannot run instead ride special drones, belted and barred and double-checked for safety, which gently bounce them into the air. It's only a few feet, though it feels like the height of the sky.

But this is no awkward dystopia, where all are forced to conform. Adults who refuse to give up their childhood joys wear wings,

too, though theirs tend to be more abstractly constructed. (Some are invisible.) And those who follow faiths which forbid the emulation of beasts, or those who simply do not want wings, need not wear them. They are all honored for this choice, as much as the soarers and flutterers themselves—for without contrasts, how does one appreciate the different forms that joy can take?

Oh, and there is such joy here, friend. Street vendors sell tiny custard-filled cakes shaped like jewel beetles, and people who've waited all year wolf them down while sucking air to cool their tongues. Artisans offer cleverly mechanized paper hummingbirds for passersby to throw; the best ones blur as they glide. As the afternoon of the Day grows long, Um-Helat's farmers arrive, invited as always to be honored alongside the city's merchants and technologers. By all three groups' efforts does the city prosper—but when aquifers and rivers dip too low, the farmers move to other lands and farm there, or change from corn-husking to rice-paddying and fishery-feeding. The management of soil and water and chemistry are intricate arts, as you know, but here they have been perfected. Here in Um-Helat there is no hunger: not among the people, and not for the migrating birds and butterflies when they dip down for a taste of savory nectar. And so farmers are particularly celebrated on the Day of Good Birds.

The parade wends through the city, farmers ducking their gazes or laughing as their fellow citizens offer salute. Here is a portly woman, waving a hat of chicken feathers that someone has gifted her. There is a reedy man in a coverall, nervously plucking at the brooch he bears, carved and lacquered to look like a ladybug. He has made it himself, and hopes others will think it fine. They do!

And here! This woman, tall and strong and bare of arm, her sleek brown scalp dotted with implanted silver studs, wearing a fine uniform of stormcloud damask. See how she moves through the crowd, grinning with them, helping up a child who has fallen. She encourages their cheers and their delight, speaking to this

along the quantum path. Now, perhaps, you will think of Um-Helat, and wish. Now you might finally be able to envision a world where people have learned to love, as they learned in our world to hate. Perhaps you will speak of Um-Helat to others, and spread the notion farther still, like joyous birds migrating on trade winds. It's possible. Everyone—even the poor, even the lazy, even the undesirable—can matter. Do you see how just the idea of this provokes utter rage in some? That is the infection defending itself . . . because if enough of us believe a thing is possible, then it becomes so.

And then? Who knows. War, maybe. The fire of fever and the purging scourge. No one wants that, but is not the alternative to lie helpless, spotty and blistered and heaving, until we all die?

So don't walk away. The child needs you, too, don't you see? You also have to fight for her, now that you know she exists, or walking away is meaningless. Here, here is my hand. Take it. Please.

Good. Good.

Now. Let's get to work.

than one man's selfishness. Poor child. She is nearly septic with the taint of our world.

Nearly. But then our social worker, the tall brown one who got a hundred strangers to smile at a handmade ladybug, crouches and offers a hand to the child.

What? What surprises you? Did you think this would end with the cold-eyed slaughter of a child? There are other options—and this is Um-Helat, friend, where even a pitiful, diseased child matters. They will keep her in quarantine, and reach out to her for several days. If the girl accepts the hand, listens to them, they will try to explain why her father had to die. She's early for the knowledge, but something must be done, do you see? Then together they will bury him, with their own hands if they must, in the beautiful garden that they tend between caseloads. This garden holds all the Um-Helatians who broke the law. Just because they have to die as deterrence doesn't mean they can't be honored for the sacrifice.

But there is only one treatment for this toxin once it gets into the blood: fighting it. Tooth and nail, spear and claw, up close and brutal; no quarter can be given, no parole, no debate. The child must grow, and learn, and become another social worker fighting an endless war against an idea . . . but she will live, and help others, and find meaning in that. If she takes the woman's hand.

Does this work for you, at last, friend? Does the possibility of harsh enforcement add enough realism? Are you better able to accept this postcolonial utopia now that you see its bloody teeth? Ah, but they did not choose this battle, the people of Um-Helat today; their ancestors did, when they spun lies and ignored conscience in order to profit from others' pain. Their greed became a philosophy, a religion, a series of nations, all built on blood. Um-Helat has chosen to be better. But sometimes, only by blood sacrifice may true evil be kept at bay.

And now we come to you, my friend. My little soldier. See what I've done? So insidious, these little thoughts, going both ways

person in one language and that person in another. (Um-Helat is a city of polyglots.) She reaches the front of the crowd and immediately spies the reedy man's ladybug, whereupon with delighted eyes and smile, she makes much of it. She points, and others see it, too, which makes the reedy man blush terribly. But there is only kindness and genuine pleasure in the smiles, and gradually the reedy man stands a little taller, walks with a wider stride. He has made his fellow citizens happier, and there is no finer virtue by the customs of this gentle, rich land.

The slanting afternoon sun stretches golden over the city, reflected light sparkling along its mica-flecked walls and laser-faceted embossings. A breeze blows up from the sea, tasting of brine and minerals, so fresh that a spontaneous cheer wafts along the crowded parade route. Young men by the waterfront, busily stirring great vats of spiced mussels and pans of rice and peas and shrimp, cook faster, for it is said in Um-Helat that the smell of the sea wakes up the belly. Young women on streetcorners bring out sitars and synthesizers and big wooden drums, the better to get the crowd dancing the young men's way. When people stop, too hot or thirsty to continue, there are glasses of fresh tamarind-lime juice. Elders staff the shops that sell this, though they also give away the juice if a person is much in need. There are always souls needing drumbeats and tamarind, in Um-Helat.

Joyous! It is a steady joy that fills this city, easy to speak of—but ah, though I have tried, it is most difficult to describe accurately. I see the incredulity in your face! The difficulty lies partly in my lack of words, and partly in your lack of understanding, because you have never seen a place like Um-Helat, and because I am myself only an observer, not yet privileged to visit. Thus I must try harder to describe it so that you might embrace it, too.

How can I illuminate the people of Um-Helat? You have seen how they love their children, and how they honor honest, clever labor. You have perhaps noted their many elders, for I have mentioned them in passing. In Um-Helat, people live long and

richly, with good health for as long as fate and choice and medicine permits. Every child knows opportunity; every parent has a life. There are some who go without housing, but they can have an apartment if they wish. Here where the spaces under bridges are swept daily and benches have light padding for comfort, they do not live badly. If these itinerant folk dwell also in delusions, they are kept from weapons or places that might do them harm; where they risk disease or injury, they are prevented —or cared for, if matters get out of hand. (We shall speak more of the caretakers soon.)

And so this is Um-Helat: a city whose inhabitants, simply, care for one another. That is a city's purpose, they believe—not merely to generate revenue or energy or products, but to shelter and nurture the people who do these things.

What have I forgotten to mention? Oh, it is the thing that will seem most fantastic to you, friend: the variety! The citizens of Um-Helat are so many and so wildly different in appearance and origin and development. People in this land come from many others, and it shows in sheen of skin and kink of hair and plumpness of lip and hip. If one wanders the streets where the workers and artisans do their work, there are slightly more people with dark skin; if one strolls the corridors of the executive tower, there are a few extra done in pale. There is history rather than malice in this, and it is still being actively, intentionally corrected—because the people of Um-Helat are not naive believers in good intentions as the solution to all ills. No, there are no worshippers of mere tolerance here, nor desperate grovelers for that grudging pittance of respect which is diversity. Um-Helatians are learned enough to understand what must be done to make the world better, and pragmatic enough to actually enact it.

Does that seem wrong to you? It should not. The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by those concealing ill intent, of insisting that people already suffering should be afflicted with further, unnecessary pain. This is the paradox of tolerance, the

make it painless. The heart to make it quick.) This is only one of the weapons carried by the social workers, and they prefer it because the pike is silent. Because there was no shot or ricochet, no crackle or sizzle, no scream, no one else will come to investigate. The disease has taken one poor victim, but it need not claim more. In this manner is the contagion contained . . . in a moment. In a moment.

Beside the man's body crouches a little girl. She's curly-haired, plump, blind, brown, tall for her age. Normally a boisterous child, she weeps now over her father's death, and her tears run hot with the injustice of it all. She heard him say, "I'm sorry." She saw the social workers show the only mercy possible. But she isn't old enough to have been warned of the consequences of breaking the law, or to understand that her father knew those consequences and accepted them—so to her, what has happened has no purpose or reason. It is a senseless, monstrous, and impossible thing, called murder.

"I'll get back at you," she says between sobs. "I'll make you die the way you made him die." This is an unthinkable thing to say. Something is very wrong here. She snarls, "How dare you. How dare you."

The social workers exchange looks of concern. They are contaminated themselves, of course; it's permitted, and frankly unavoidable in their line of work. Impossible to dam a flood without getting wet. (There are measures in place. The studs on their scalps—well. In our own world, those who volunteered to work in leper colonies were once venerated, and imprisoned with them.) The social workers know, therefore, that for incomprehensible reasons, this girl's father has shared the poison knowledge of our world with her. An uncontaminated citizen of Um-Helat would have asked "Why?" after the initial shock and horror, because they would expect a reason. There would be a reason. But this girl has already decided that the social workers are less important than her father, and therefore the reason doesn't matter. She believes that the entire city is less important

It's the Day of Good Birds in Um-Helat, where every soul matters, and even the idea that some might not is anathema.

This, then, is why the social workers of Um-Helat have come together: because someone has breached the barrier between worlds. A citizen of Um-Helat has listened, on equipment you would not recognize but which records minute quantum perturbations excited by signal wavelengths, to our radio. He has watched our television. He has followed our social media, played our videos, liked our selfies. We are remarkably primitive, compared to Um-Helat. Time flows the same in both worlds, but people there have not wasted themselves on crushing one another into submission, and this makes a remarkable difference. So anyone can do it—build a thing to traverse the worlds. Like building your own ham radio. Easy. Which is why there is an entire underground industry in Um-Helat—ah! crime! now you believe a little more—built around information gleaned from the strange alien world that is our own. Pamphlets are written and distributed. Art and whispers are traded. The forbidden is so seductive, is it not? Even here, where only things that cause harm to others are called evil. The information-gleaners know that what they do is wrong. They know this is what destroyed the old cities. And indeed, they are horrified at what they hear through the speakers, see on the screens. They begin to perceive that ours is a world where the notion that some people are less important than others has been allowed to take root, and grow until it buckles and cracks the foundations of our humanity. "How could they?" the gleaners exclaim, of us. "Why would they do such things? How can they just leave those people to starve? Why do they not listen when that one complains of disrespect? What does it mean that these ones have been assaulted and no one, no one, cares? Who treats other people like that?" And yet, even amid their marvel, they share the idea. The evil . . . spreads.

So the social workers of Um-Helat stand, talking now, over the body of a man. He is dead—early, unwilling, with a beautifully crafted pike jammed through his spine and heart. (The spine to

treason of free speech: We hesitate to admit that some people are just fucking evil and need to be stopped.

This is Um-Helat, after all, and not that barbaric America. This is not Omelas, a tick of a city, fat and happy with its head buried in a tortured child. My accounting of Um-Helat is an homage, true, but there's nothing for you to fear, friend.

And so how does Um-Helat exist? How can such a city possibly survive, let alone thrive? Wealthy with no poor, advanced with no war, a beautiful place where all souls know themselves beautiful . . . It cannot be, you say. Utopia? How banal. It's a fairy tale, a thought exercise. Crabs in a barrel, dog-eat-dog, oppression Olympics—it would not last, you insist. It could never be in the first place. Racism is natural, so natural that we will call it "tribalism" to insinuate that everyone does it. Sexism is natural and homophobia is natural and religious intolerance is natural and greed is natural and cruelty is natural and savagery and fear and and and . . . and. "Impossible!" you hiss, your fists slowly clenching at your sides. "How dare you. What have these people done to make you believe such lies? What are you doing to me, to suggest that it is possible? How dare you. How dare you."

Oh, friend! I fear I have offended. My apologies.

Yet . . . how else can I convey Um-Helat to you, when even the thought of a happy, just society raises your ire so? Though I confess I am puzzled as to why you are so angry. It's almost as if you feel threatened by the very idea of equality. Almost as if some part of you needs to be angry. Needs unhappiness and injustice. But . . . do you?

Do you?

Do you believe, friend? Do you accept the Day of Good Birds, the city, the joy? No? Then let me tell you one more thing.

Remember the woman? So tall and brown, so handsome and bald, so loving in her honest pleasure, so fine in her stormcloud

gray. She is one of many wearing the same garb, committed to the same purpose. Follow her, now, as she leaves behind the crowd and walks along the biofiber-paved side streets into the shadows. Beneath a skyscraper that floats a few meters off the ground—oh, it is perfectly safe, Um-Helat has controlled gravity for generations now—she stops. There two others await: one gethen, one male, both clad in gray damask, too. They are also bald, their studded heads a-gleam. They greet each other warmly, with hugs where those are welcomed.

They are no one special. Just some of the many people who work to ensure the happiness and prosperity of their fellow citizens. Think of them as social workers if you like; their role is no different from that of social workers anywhere. Word has come of a troubling case, and this is why they gather: to discuss it, and make a difficult decision.

There are wonders far greater than a few floating skyscrapers in Um-Helat, you see, and one of these is the ability to bridge the distances between possibilities—what we would call universes. Anyone can do it, but almost no one tries. That is because, due to a quirk of spacetime, the only world that people in Um-Helat can reach is our own. And why would anyone from this glorious place want to come anywhere near our benighted hellscape?

Again you seem offended. Ah, friend! You have no right to be.

In any case, there's little danger of travel. Even Um-Helat has not successfully found a way to reduce the tremendous energy demands of macro-scale planar transversal. Only wave particles can move from our world to theirs, and back again. Only information. Who would bother? Ah, but you forget: This is a land where no one hungers, no one is left ill, no one lives in fear, and even war is almost forgotten. In such a place, buoyed by the luxury of safety and comfort, people may seek knowledge solely for knowledge's sake.

But some knowledge is dangerous.

Um-Helat has been a worse place, after all, in its past. Not all of its peoples, so disparate in origin and custom and language, came together entirely by choice. The city had a different civilization once—one which might not have upset you so! (Poor thing. There, there.) Remnants of that time dot the land all around the city, ruined and enormous and half-broken. Here a bridge. There a great truck, on its back a rusting, curve-sided thing that ancient peoples referred to by the exotic term missile. In the distance: the skeletal remains of another city, once just as vast as Um-Helat, but never so lovely. Works such as these encumber all the land, no more and no less venerable to the Um-Helatians than the rest of the landscape. Indeed, every young citizen must be reminded of these things upon coming of age, and told carefully curated stories of their nature and purpose. When the young citizens learn this, it is a shock almost incomprehensible, in that they literally lack the words to comprehend such things. The languages spoken in Um-Helat were once our languages, yes—for this world was once our world; it was not so much parallel as the same, back then. You might still recognize the languages, but what would puzzle you is how they speak . . . and how they don't. Oh, some of this will be familiar to you in concept at least, like terms for gender that mean neither he nor she, and the condemnation of words meant to slur and denigrate. And yet you will puzzle over the Um-Helatians' choice to retain descriptive terms for themselves like kinky-haired or fat or deaf. But these are just words, friend, don't you see? Without the attached contempt, such terms have no more meaning than if horses could proudly introduce themselves as palomino or miniature or hairy-footed. Difference was never the problem in and of itself—and Um-Helatians still have differences with each other, of opinion and otherwise. Of course they do! They're people. But what shocks the young citizens of Um-Helat is the realization that, once, those differences of opinion involved differences in respect. That once, value was ascribed to some people, and not others. That once, humanity was acknowledged for some, and not others.